

# Reena Esmail

Born February 11, 1983, Chicago, Illinois

## Meri Sakhi Ki Avaaz

At its core, *Meri Sakhi Ki Avaaz* is a piece about sisterhood. Each movement's short text epitomizes one of the many facets of having and being a sister. It is also about what sisterhood looks like when expanded beyond a single family or a single culture— when two women, from two different musical cultures create space for one another's voices to be heard.

The first movement is a modern take on Delibes's famous Flower Duet from the opera *Lakme*. In the opera, Delibes depicts two Indian women singing by a river. In 1880s France, this orientalism was a point of entry into another culture far away. But today, that culture is easily accessible, and this is my attempt to show you what an 'updated' version of this duet might sound like with a Hindustani singer actually present to represent herself. So much of Western art music is about creating dialogue between the old and new, responding to our vast canon and musical tradition. And for the work I do, I couldn't think of a better jumping-off point than this classic duet.

For the second movement, I wrote a classical Hindustani bandish or 'fixed composition' in what they call *ati-vilambit*

— a tempo that is so slow that the western metronome doesn't even have a setting for it. While Hindustani musicians would normally stay in one key for an entire piece (and, to be honest, for their entire professional career), this movement modulates once every avartan, or rhythmic cycle, and also allows space for improvisation within a very rigid western orchestral structure. Additionally, the singers are singing in two different raags (a raag, in Indian classical music is a melodic framework for improvisation) — the Hindustani singer is in Charukeshi, while the soprano is in Vachaspati – and as the movement goes on, the switches between the raags get closer and closer.

The third movement is about mirrors and opposites. I used two different raags that are actual mirror images of one another: Bhup, a light and sweet raag, and Malkauns, a dark, heavy raag. You will hear the shifts in tonality as the phrases cross from one into the other. Also embedded in this piece is a classic Hindustani jugalbandi (a musical competition) that is done completely in mirror image, and with both Indian and Western solfege systems, and it ends with both women crossing into one another's musical cultures: the Hindustani singer begins singing phrases in English and the soprano joins in for ataranain harmony.

This piece has been almost a decade in the making. In 2009, I wrote a piece called Aria, for Hindustani vocalist and orchestra – it was the first time I had ever attempted to put a

Hindustani musician in my work, and it was the beginning of a long journey of discovery between these two musical cultures. This piece is the result of what I've found along that journey — an encyclopedia of sorts, of the many points of resonance I've discovered between these musical cultures. One of the greatest things I've learned is that I cannot do it alone. These ideas are as much mine as they are Saili Oak's. We have spent hours and hours over many summers sitting at my kitchen table, drinking chai and dreaming up the ideas that have become this piece. And as Saili is quick to point out: this is a culmination, but also a beginning of everything that is yet to come. I might be a biological only-child, but I have found my musical soul sister in Saili.

## Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

### Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125

Ludwig van Beethoven was a German composer and pianist. Beethoven's father, Johann, was his first music teacher and subsequent instructors taught him keyboard and violin, often with ferocious intensity during peculiar late-night sessions. Aware of Leopold Mozart's successes advocating for his children, Johann attempted the same with less overall success but still putting the young prodigy in front of formidable patrons of the arts who would befriend and finance Ludwig.

From the age of twenty-one, Beethoven lived in Vienna, Austria where most of his major works were premiered. There he was diligent with his studies, supported by nobility and applauded as a virtuoso performer and improviser. He wrote nine symphonies, one opera, numerous concertos, mostly for his instrument, the piano, a multitude of works in chamber settings, and a staggering array of solo instrumental works.

Beethoven's ninth symphony was written over the course of his final decade culminating in 1822 and premiered in 1824 to great acclaim in Vienna. Since then, a work seemingly too difficult to perform, too long to endure and embracing of too many stylistic conventions to be taken seriously has served to mark some of mankind's most triumphant, sublime, and vile moments and personalities with equal effect. Such is the beguiling genius of this pinnacle work of the Western musical repertory.

The symphony is written for full symphony orchestra, chorus, and four vocal soloists. A typical performance lasts approximately 65 minutes.

The first movement's opening vacant, rustling pianissimo was one of Beethoven's original ideas for the symphony. Broad, enveloping crescendos with grandiose climaxes are another feature of the first movement in particular. The movement is a sonata form and listeners will hear the opening music as a demarkation of each section, softly for the exposition and development; a violently sustained fortissimo iteration of the opening material marks the recapitulation. If not for the

constant renewal of melodic material, the movement might have collapsed under its own weight, thus is the scale of Beethoven's genius to lighten and intensify all facets of melody, rhythm and harmony to guide us through the music's wave-like torrents.

The second movement was referred to as a 'roguish comedy' by the *Theater-Zeitung* critic reviewing an early performance. The *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* commented "the wildest mischief plays its wicked game... all the instruments compete in the banter...". The striking opening motive, interrupted by rests and unexpected timpani punctuations along with the fleet, running gestures in the strings and winds delighted nineteenth-century audiences. While it may be tempting to treat each movement as a weighty monolith, those early audiences clearly were in tune with the movement's emotional relief after the epic opening movement. The second movement is a scherzo-trio-scherzo form. The trio is unusual because it shifts to a duple rhythmic meter but the expected pastoral feeling is maintained. The third trombone enters briefly at the beginning of the trio marking the first entrance of the low brass in the symphony.

By the third movement's graceful, singing opening, listeners are primed to expect the unexpected when it comes to the structural variations Beethoven may employ. Indeed the uncomplicated dovetailing melody between winds and strings gives everyone a chance to catch a breath and stretch emotionally. The movement proceeds as a series of variations on the opening melody, principally by the violins. Two

contrasting sections in flowing triple meter separate the increasingly embellished variations. Of special note for this movement is the soloistic contributions of the fourth french horn player. Historians have remarked that the wide ranging solos may have been allocated to the player because they had a new instrument available to them at the time - a valved french horn.

The most well-known movement of the ninth symphony is undoubtedly its finale. The full force of the orchestra, chorus and soloists comes together in an ever-building series of variations on the “Joy” theme. One of the most famous melodies of all time actually gave Beethoven an enormous amount of trouble. There are dozens of versions of its final bars in his sketchbooks!

The movement starts with what composer Richard Wagner called the “horror fanfare” and a striking instrumental “recitative” from the cellos and basses interspersed with clever returns of material from previous movements. The dramatic recitativo, first by the low strings and then by the baritone soloist, is the nexus that welcomes voices into the sprawling symphony. Here, Beethoven introduces the word ‘Joy’ (*Freude*) with further text he wrote. Subsequent sung text set to the “Joy” theme is drawn from three stanzas of Schiller’s *Ode to Joy* (1785/1803). (([Friedrich Schiller](#) (1759-1805) was a german poet whose philosophical work was focused on the question of human freedom.)). In total, there are nine variations of the “Joy” theme, including the “Turkish March” (7th variation) featuring the tenor soloist.

Following an extended instrumental fugue on the “Joy” theme, a new text is introduced to what can only be described as arresting and declamatory , “Be embraced, you millions! (“Seid umschlungen, Millionen!”). The two themes (“Joy” and Be embraced...”) join together in an extended double fugue with swirling gestures in the strings. The music comes to an ethereal hold before the four vocal soloists become enmeshed in the musical palette driving toward the symphony’s euphoric conclusion.

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